

## Save \$\$ -- Be a Payphone Pro

For years, the good old reliable payphone was one of the constants for the consumer. They were everywhere, rates were regulated, and the method of dialing was standard from phone to phone. No more. Now consumers need to be savvy to make sure they get the service and the price they expect.

For decades, payphones were a regulated monopoly service of the local telephone company. That monopoly was broken up in the 1980s when other firms were allowed to make and install competitive payphones. More deregulation occurred in 1997, when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) deregulated all pay phone rates.

Now payphone owners can charge whatever they want for local and long-distance calls. In order to give consumers a fair chance, payphones are also supposed to provide them with information so they can find out the rates before making a call. If you don't know to look or ask for this information, it can cost you plenty.

The UTC has received an increasing number of complaints from payphone customers. Sometimes the required disclosure information is not provided. Other times consumers fail to ask the rates and are charged an outrageous amount for a long distance collect call. Still other times, the consumer is blocked from "dialing around" to get their preferred long distance carrier.

In this deregulated world, it's up to you to get the service and rates you expect. **Turn to page 4** for some simple tips to help you navigate the world of deregulated payphones, and where to turn for help if the rates and service aren't right.

## Keeping the Rails Safe: A UTC Priority

Protecting public safety is a key part of the UTC's mission. One of our longest-standing and most extensive safety program keeps the state's railroads operating safely and smoothly.

Washington is served by two major carriers (Union Pacific and Burlington Northern Santa Fe), a number of smaller "short haul" lines, and the Amtrak passenger service. Increases in the amount of freight hauled by rail and the need for commuter rail and high speed passenger service make safety issues more challenging.

The UTC's rail safety program is meeting the challenges by focusing on a number of key areas:

**Operation Lifesaver:** This is a public education program which teaches rail safety to approximately 100,000 people per year, ranging from grade school kids to senior citizens. From respecting crossing signals to staying off tracks, the Operation Lifesaver message has helped reduce rail-related fatalities in the state by 50 percent since its beginning in 1972. You can schedule a free Operation Lifesaver presentation for your group by calling Bob Boston of the UTC at 360-664-1264.

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## COMMISSIONERS CORNER

By Commissioner  
Bill Gillis

In recent years, elected officials and regulators have worked to allow consumers a choice of telecommunications service providers. Discussion continues regarding the appropriateness of giving consumers similar choices of energy service providers.



The move to competition provides consumers with both new opportunities and new challenges. The opportunity is giving consumers the choice of the service provider that offers the products and terms best matching their individual needs. For example, an active, mobile family may appreciate the “one-rate” plans which allow the customer to pay the same basic long-distance rate for both a home phone and a wireless phone. Another family that calls mainly from the home phone and within the local area would likely prefer a more traditional telephone service option.

At the same time, competition increases complexity for consumers. With the monopoly offerings historically available to consumers, decisions about which service is the best deal were not an issue. Consumers simply picked among a limited list of services offered by their local company. With the move to competition, consumers are bombarded by offers which can be difficult to understand and compare.

**Continued on page 7**

## New 564 area code for Western Washington

Next year, many Western Washington residents will see a new area code and a change in the way they dial local telephone calls. Beginning July 29, 2000, it will be mandatory for customers in the current 360 area code to dial 10 numbers (area code and seven digit number) to complete a local call.

Ten-digit local dialing will start working Feb. 5, 2000. This will allow customers to make necessary changes to office equipment, modems, dialing devices and other communications equipment before ten-digit dialing becomes mandatory.

Area code 360 will run out of numbers by September 2000. Previously, when a new area code was introduced, the existing area was geographically divided so that roughly half the customers were able to keep the existing area code while the other half changed to the new area code. This time, the new area code (564) will be available to all residents living in the 360 area. Customers will keep their current phone numbers while new customers and new services will be assigned numbers from the 564 area code. Under this proposal, everyone with a 360 or 564 area code number will have to dial 10 digits (area code plus local phone number) to complete a local call.

### Four new area codes in five years

The 564 area code will be the fourth area code added to Western Washington since 1995. Telephone numbers are being consumed more rapidly than originally expected for a variety of reasons. More people are moving into Western Washington's suburbs and rural areas, which is increasing demand for communication services. At the same time, technological innovations have stimulated use of wireless phones and pagers—both of which require a phone number to function. The growing popularity of the Internet also has encouraged homes and businesses to add more phone lines, and telecommunications competition has resulted in a growing number of rival companies which require phone numbers in order to sell their services.

More information on the upcoming area code change is available from the UTC website at [www.wutc.wa.gov](http://www.wutc.wa.gov) or from Tim Sweeney at 360-664-1118.

# CONSUMER NEWS IN BRIEF

## Scottish Power/PacifiCorp merger approved

The merger of ScottishPower and Portland, Ore.-based PacifiCorp should “provide customers with benefits unlikely to occur in the absence of the transaction,” according to the commission’s recent order approving the merger. As part of the merger approval, the UTC accepted the conditions agreed to by the combined company including bill credits and a set of customer service standards commitments. Beginning Jan. 1, 2001 and running through 2004, PacifiCorp customers will receive credits totaling \$12 million or a 1.7 percent reduction in their monthly electric bill. In addition, the company will pay customers for outages and missed appointments. For example, if the electricity goes out due to a failure in PacifiCorp’s system and is not restored within 24 hours, each residential customer would receive \$50. For more information contact Tim Sweeney at 360-664-1118; e-mail [tsweeney@wutc.wa.gov](mailto:tsweeney@wutc.wa.gov).

## New anti-slamming rules proposed

Slamming occurs when your long-distance or local phone service is switched to another company without your permission. The problem has been growing in Washington State (and around the country), and the UTC is considering new rules to more effectively protect consumers. The proposed rules would continue the practice of allowing customers who have been slammed to get their service restored to their original carrier without cost. In addition, under the proposed rule, customers could choose to enact an “account freeze” which would require their written permission before any changes to their service are made. The commission is expected to consider the proposed rule changes before the end of the year. For more information, contact Vicki Elliott at 360-664-1100; e-mail [velliott@wutc.wa.gov](mailto:velliott@wutc.wa.gov).

## Energy rules under review

The UTC is conducting a comprehensive review of the “operating” rules that apply to electric and natural gas companies. These include accounting, metering, and consumer protection provisions. A series of workshops has been held to discuss possible rule revisions, and UTC staff is preparing changes to propose formally to the commission early next year. Individuals or organizations who wish to comment on possible rule changes before formal rule changes are proposed need to do so now. There will be an additional comment period after the formal rule proposal is made. More information on the rules review is available at the UTC website ([www.wutc.wa.gov](http://www.wutc.wa.gov)) or from Graciela Etchart at 360-664-1310 (e-mail [getchart@wutc.wa.gov](mailto:getchart@wutc.wa.gov)).

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**Train Speeds.** The federal government sets train speeds, but the UTC is allowed to investigate local conditions and recommend lower speeds based on unique safety conditions. With the increased interest in high-speed passenger train service, this issue has become more controversial in recent years. In many areas, the UTC has been able to push for safety improvements to track or crossings that protect the public.

**Grade Crossings.** The UTC inspects the safety of grade crossings throughout the state and makes sure that safety features, such as lights and crossbars, are working properly. The UTC also considers petitions to open and close crossings. In recent years the trend has been toward fewer crossings, but with more safety features.

**Track Conditions.** UTC inspectors check railroad tracks on an ongoing basis to make sure that joints are properly bolted, curve elevations are correct, and that switches are working (among other things). Poor track maintenance can lead to derailments.

**Hazardous Materials.** UTC inspectors work to ensure that hazardous materials are properly packed and placed on trains, and that correct shipping papers and placards are used. This reduces the chance of accidents and, in the event of a spill, provides clean up crews accurate information about the nature of the material.

The UTC works closely with federal inspectors, local governments, and the railroads toward a common goal – to keep the rails safe and efficient for the citizens of our state. Get more information about the UTC rail safety program from Mike Rowsell at 360-664-1265.

# Smart Consumer Payphone Tips

Using a public payphone is not as easy as it used to be. Federal deregulation of payphones has resulted in pay phones charging varying rates for local and long-distance calls. When using a payphone, it pays to keep a few tips in mind.

## **Check the local coin rate posted on the phone.**

Rates may vary from one phone to another and call length may be limited as well. Before making a local call, look closely at the information about local calls posted on or near the payphone.

## **Verify the rates for services.**

Even if the coin rate is competitive, rates for other services might be high. Be sure to check the rates for the service you are going to use, particularly if you are making a collect, calling card, or credit card call.

## **Toll-free numbers may not be free.**

While you can still make a toll-free call from a payphone, federal rules require the owner of the toll-free number to compensate the payphone operator for the call. Some calling cards pass the cost along to their customers. Generally, this surcharge is no more than 35 cents per call. Also, some toll-free number owners block calls from payphones.

## **Prepare in advance for situations when you might use a payphone.**

Trying to make local and long-distance calls from a public payphone can be confusing and occasionally expensive. Like home and business telephones, a public payphone is preset to one

or more companies providing local, long-distance and operator services. However, you can route your call to your desired carrier. Determine in advance how to contact your preferred long-distance company from a payphone and keep those instructions handy for emergencies. Often this means either dialing a toll-free number or a seven-digit access code. After dialing an access code, you will hear a menu of choices. You may then complete your call by entering the number you wish to call, your calling card number and personal identification code or it will prompt you to dial zero for an operator. Automated operator assistance is less expensive than using a live operator.

## **A calling card does not guarantee you will be using that service.**

Payphones will often accept other calling cards as a form of payment, particularly calling cards from local telephone companies. Do not assume by using the card that you will receive its services. If you simply dial zero instead of your preferred carrier's access number, the call will be handled by the carrier preset on that particular phone. The rates will be those of that carrier, not your local exchange company and not the long-distance company presubscribed to your home phone.

## **Learn how to accept collect calls without getting soaked.**

When you accept a collect call, you are accepting responsibility for the charges. Before accepting a collect call, ask the operator what charges you will incur. If it is an automated operator, hold and wait until the live operator answers to ask for the rates.

*Trying to make local and long-distance calls from a public payphone can be confusing and occasionally expensive.*

### **Stop, Look and Listen.**

Be cautious when using payphones. Check the details before you call. Look at the posted information on the payphone. Read the fine print. Listen to the operator's message (live or automated) when making a calling card or any other type of operator-assisted call. If you are unfamiliar with the company, call the operator and ask for rates before placing the call.

Federal and state rules require that payphones provide access to all available carriers. If your preferred carrier's access code is not working, the payphone may be in violation of UTC and federal rules. If so, call the repair/refund number posted on the phone and report the problem. Ask the operator to transfer you to your preferred carrier, or to provide a workable access number to the carrier.

### **How to register a complaint.**

Posted on each payphone is a repair/refund number, as well as phone numbers of the payphone owner and the operator service provider(s). If you have a problem with the payphone (i.e., coins are not returned on an incomplete call, access to a preferred carrier is blocked, no phone book), dial the repair/refund number from that phone and report the problem. The payphone owner should offer to repair the problem quickly. If you still aren't satisfied, call the special UTC telephone number posted on the payphone.

If the problem is on your bill, first contact the company to discuss your concerns. If necessary, escalate your question to a supervisor or manager. If you can't resolve your problem directly with the company, you can contact the UTC for help by writing, sending e-mail to [complaint@wutc.wa.gov](mailto:complaint@wutc.wa.gov), or calling toll free 1-800-562-6150.

## **Directory Assistance Also Changing**

Directory assistance is another example of where competition is bringing consumers more choices, but you have to shop for the best deal. Because this service is now competitive in many areas of the state, rates vary.

US West now can change its directory rates without UTC permission. US West must still provide one free directory assistance call to residential customers. The company will also continue to provide free calls to customers who are physically unable to use the printed telephone directory and to customers making calls from hospitals. Business customers are charged for each directory-assistance call.

While the UTC no longer regulates the rates, customers who have a problem with service can still get help from the UTC. That's true for directory-assistance service provided by all local and long distance companies, not just US West. You can reach the UTC by writing us, by sending e-mail to [complaints@wutc.wa.gov](mailto:complaints@wutc.wa.gov), or by calling 1-800-562-6150.

With the advent of competition you aren't limited to your local phone company when you need to find a number. A number of companies, including AT&T and MCI now offer local and nationwide directory assistance. The UTC website ([www.wutc.wa.gov](http://www.wutc.wa.gov)) has a current list of directory assistance providers and rates.

*For a free  
subscription  
to this  
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newsletter  
write the UTC,  
call us at 1-  
800-562-6150  
or e-mail us  
at  
[info@wutc.wa.gov](mailto:info@wutc.wa.gov)*

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

## Low-Income Energy Help

Winter is upon us and with it higher energy bills. For a low-income customer, the problem can be worse because their home or apartment isn't fully weatherized. In this issue, we'll look at some programs designed to help low-income customers keep the heat on during the cold.

According to weather forecasters, this winter may be colder and wetter than usual. If you think that high heating bills might cause you problems, now is the time to find out about your options.

### **Are there places that can give me financial help with my bill?**

There are two main sources of financial help for low-income customers with their energy bills.

**Community Action Programs (CAP)** administer federal heating assistance grants. These grants are used to pay heating bills during the winter months. To determine your eligibility and possible grant amount you need to contact your local CAP agency. CAP agencies also can provide you with information on ways to weatherize your home, which will help lower your heating bills. Check your local phone book for the CAP that serves your area.

**The Salvation Army** maintains an energy fund, paid for through private donations. This could cover a part of your heating bill. Assistance is typically available at the beginning of January. You need to contact your local Salvation Army office for details. Again, the number will be in your local phone book. You may also wish to consider seeking help from local churches. Many congregations pull together to help families in need.

### **I'll be able to pay my bill eventually - can I spread the payments out?**

Maybe. You often can make payment arrangements with the utility directly by calling the business office and explaining your situation. Because you can be disconnected for non-payment, you need to take care in working out a payment plan that you can realistically meet. To avoid any confusion later, be sure to ask the company to send a written confirmation letter of the arrangements. Be sure to make your payment arrangement plans well in advance of any scheduled shut off.

### **Aren't utilities prevented from shutting off people in the winter?**

Our state does have a "shut off moratorium" which allows low-income customers who have exhausted all other alternatives to keep the heat on from November 15 to March 15. It is important to know that if the payment arrangements made under the program aren't kept, the company CAN disconnect your utility and refuse to reconnect until the entire balance owed is paid off, no matter what the circumstances. To qualify for the moratorium, you have to notify the utility within five days after receiving a disconnect notice, apply for energy assistance and low-income weatherization programs, and provide the utility with a statement that proves you are income-eligible.

*Thanks to Gail Griffin-Wallace for her help in preparing this FAQ. If you have suggestions for future topics, write to the Editor, News&Views, P.O. Box 47250, Olympia, WA 98504 or e-mail [info@wutc.wa.gov](mailto:info@wutc.wa.gov).*



### Choosing a Long Distance Company

Want to look at whether you're getting the best long distance deal? Here are a few recent resources to help you. In all of them a recurring theme emerges: Carefully review your *current* calling habits and costs for long distance service and then do some comparison shopping, asking specific questions. Be cautious of deceptive sales techniques and be aware of your rights as a long distance service customer.

The **Federal Trade Commission (FTC)** has a free publication entitled *Shopping in the New Telecommunications Marketplace*. This brochure includes many specific questions for evaluating your current service and for comparing other long distance calling plans. It outlines your rights and lists several consumer groups, as well as information on where to complain if problems arise. This brochure may be ordered from the FTC by calling toll-free 1-877-382-4357 and is also available on the Internet at <http://www.ftc.gov>.

A consumer group recommended by the FTC is **Telecommunications Research and Action Center (TRAC)**, a non-profit organization which publishes long distance comparison charts for residential and small business customers, as well as consumer guides. There is a charge for these publications. Contact TRAC at P. O. Box 27279, Washington, DC 20005 for more information or visit TRAC on the Internet at <http://www.trac.org>, where the TRAC/Salestar automated "Web Pricer" long distance cost calculator is available free.

You may also want to request these articles from your local library:

**"Cheaper Phone Bills,"** *Consumers Research Magazine*, November 1997. Advises consumers how to bargain for better deals.

**"10-10 Long Distance Calling"** *Consumer Reports*, May 1999. Are "10-10" plans right for you -- find out here.

**"Better Call Assistance,"** *Consumers Research Magazine*, July 1999. Includes tips on how to save money on directory assistance calls. An astounding one million wrong numbers are handed out each day, creating an error rate of 15%, and consumers are often billed for these mistakes.

*Questions? Comments? Contact Mary Lu White, UTC librarian at 260-664-1199 or e-mail [info@wutc.wa.gov](mailto:info@wutc.wa.gov).*

Along with choice also comes new risks. Consumers receive what appear to be attractive offerings from companies they have never heard of. In many cases they are unsure what to do if the promised service is not delivered. Unfortunately, some consumers receive bills in the mail for services they did not order or they may have ordered as a result of misleading advertising.

The move to replace monopoly utility service with competitive options can be judged a success only if consumers agree that it has been beneficial. This means that the UTC must refocus our efforts, giving greater emphasis to consumer education and protection.

We must establish new ground rules that make it easier for consumers to sort through the list of complex choices. New state requirements may be needed to ensure information presented to consumers on monthly bills is understandable and alerts consumers to the addition of services that they may or may not have paid for. We should ensure that marketing materials are accurate and presented to consumers in terms they can understand.

The vast majority of utility industry service providers are honest businesspeople who deliver what is promised in terms clearly understood by consumers. Unfortunately, there exist a minority of "bad-actors" in the new competitive industry who use deception to charge consumers for services they did not order. These "bad-actors" can not be tolerated as they undermine the benefits of competition for everyone. The UTC, along with the State Attorney General and our Federal counterparts, has an obligation to develop new mechanisms to ensure such bad actors do not succeed. The UTC is committed to meeting that challenge and we invite your input and suggestions.

W A S H I N G T O N



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Washington Utilities and  
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P.O. Box 47250  
1300 S. Evergreen Park Drive SW  
Olympia, WA 98504-7250

Toll Free: 1-800-562-6150

Phone: (360)664-1160

Fax: (360)586-1150

TTY: (360)586-8203

Web site: [www.wutc.wa.gov](http://www.wutc.wa.gov)

Email: [info@wutc.wa.gov](mailto:info@wutc.wa.gov)

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## ***In This Issue***

*Learn how to save money at payphones, discover the UTC railroad  
safety programs, find out how to get winter home heating assis-  
tance, and see if the new area code will affect you.*

## **Free consumer publications for you. . .**

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Guide to Garbage and Recycling Service  
Guide to Household Movers

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Write to:

WUTC  
P.O. Box 47250  
Olympia, WA 98504